

Her Red-Letter Night.

THE SPRIGHTLY STORY OF AN UNMARRIED WOMAN OF THIRTY-ONE.

BY MARGARET BUSBEE SHIPP.

I.

“I MIGHT do better, probably should; then again, I might do worse,” reflected Ephraim Horn complacently. “Old maids are not as fly-away as young girls, and a heap more thankful. The Widow Barclay is a sight better looking than Lucinda, but I couldn’t stand those impertinent little minxes of hers. And my children think the world of Lucinda. I guess it’s the best arrangement; but I wish she had a little more flesh on her bones! If she gets any sallower, I may back out yet.” He laughed jocosely into his mirrored face, and tied his red cravat.

“First proposal you ever had, eh?” he asked, after Lucinda had accepted him with a fluttering heart.

Lucinda guilelessly confessed that it was. She was thirty-one, and instead of blossoming into a gracious womanhood, she had withered in the colorless years. Her days were spent in thankless service for her stepbrothers and stepsisters. The younger ones repaid her by their affection; the selfishness of the older ones was largely her own fault, as she gave them time and labor and patience, and was grateful for the return of ordinary civility.

Her stepmother was ill-pleased at the idea of her marrying.

“I certainly hate to think of all the sewing and mending that’ll fall on Marie and Marguerite’s shoulders. They ought to be having fun at their age.”

Lucinda might have retorted that when she was eighteen her stepmother had taken a different view of the case; but she answered kindly:

“I’ll get a lot of mending done before I go, so the girls won’t have much on hand at first.”

But even this did not reconcile Mrs. Fifer to Lucinda’s marriage.

“And your brothers—one would think ’twould be more pleasure to do a little work for your own flesh and blood than for other folks! Though I ain’t denyin’ it’ll be easier, as Eph Horn has two boys, and I’ve got six.”

Her father, however, was gratified at the news, and rallied her in his good-natured way:

“Well, now, so you and Eph are goin’ to hit it off? I wouldn’t have thought you’d fancy Eph. I don’t like men with pale freckles, who are afraid of dogs, myself. But Eph’s well-to-do, and he’ll take good care of you, I guess. What must we do about the weddin’ clothes, eh? You haven’t had a good frock this many a day——”

“Marie needs a party dress, and Marguerite——”

“Well, let ‘em wear their old duds for once. Lucy’s been a good girl, and she shall have some new toggery. I’ve just sold the wheat, and been paid for it. I think Lucy had better go up to Greenville to Cousin Ella Baker’s, and get her things there.”

Mutiny was in his wife’s eyes, but she knew protestations were useless on those rare occasions when her good-natured spouse “put his foot down.” So Lucinda’s trip was decided upon, and her father gave her a generous check, with the injunction that she “needn’t tell the ex-act figures to ma.”

The groom-elect was disconcerted at the news.

“Why, Lucinda, I’ve business that’ll call me to Greenville soon. I hear there are mighty pretty girls up there. Suppose, when I come, you don’t let on that we’re engaged? A man likes a little fling before he’s yoked up, you know.”

“But Cousin Ella will be obliged to know when I introduce you,” faltered Lucinda.

“No need to introduce me; I won’t

come around. We can see each other at home," he said, and poor Lucy tried to be content.

II.

LUCINDA had a busy fortnight in Greenville. Her cousin took a warm interest in the trousseau, and insisted upon selecting pretty, becoming colors instead of the somber shades Lucinda was accustomed to wear. The materials for undergarments were packed in her trunk, to be made up after she returned home, but Mrs. Baker determined that the dresses should be made under her supervision.

One morning Lucinda read in the local column that Mr. Ephraim Horn was registered at the Central Hotel. She did not go to her dressmaker's, as she had expected to do, but it was in vain that she waited for him to call. In the afternoon she saw him drive by in a dazzling red buggy, with a pretty girl beside him. The first pang of jealousy Lucinda had ever known smote her heart and brought a mist to her pale gray eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked her Cousin Ella.

"I wish," said Lucinda, timidly voicing her longing—"I wish I was young and pretty, or I wish I *had been*. I never was young, and had good times, and beaux, and a hat with an ostrich feather, never in all my life!"

Mrs. Baker told this to her son when he came in at dinner. He was a great, strapping fellow, who stood six feet six in his stockings. His voice had a deep note of suppressed strength, like the roar of a bull, and his fighting prowess was the boast of three counties. His duties as sheriff had called him to a neighboring village, so that he had been away during Lucinda's visit.

"Jim, I want you to do me a favor," said his mother. "There's a dance at the hall to-night—please take poor Lucy!"

"Why, I meant to ask Annette Turner. You can just look at Lucinda and see that she wouldn't enjoy it."

"I suppose not. But she's had such a dull life, and she's going to settle down to slaving for a man who probably

doesn't appreciate how unselfish and good she is. I'd like her to have one good time! But I suppose you couldn't make the men dance with her."

"Couldn't I?" said the sheriff grimly. His mother had touched his pride. "I reckon I could make 'em dance fast enough with any lady I escorted. You get her fixed, and I'll see to the rest!"

Lucinda's recollections of dances were so humiliating that she would have declined to go, save for a reason she would have been ashamed to confess to herself—a desire to see her betrothed, pale freckles and all, and a painful curiosity to know if he was to escort the pretty girl who had been his companion that afternoon.

"You won't have another chance to wear your new clothes here, so put on the white organdie," suggested Mrs. Baker. "You'll see it isn't too young for you."

It was daintily made, and the stirring gave a pretty fullness to Lucy's narrow figure. A knot of black velvet brought out unexpected lights in her dull-colored hair, and Lucinda felt agreeably surprised at the unfamiliar figure that her mirror reflected.

III.

As she entered the hall where the dance was held, Lucinda met Ephraim Horn. On his arm was the lady of the ostrich feather.

"How d'ye do, Ephraim?" she stammered.

"Why, how are you, Miss Fifer?" he replied jauntily. "Let me introduce you to Miss Mamie Marshall."

Lucinda bowed, confused. As she and her cousin turned away, Horn took a few steps after them.

"Don't give me away, Lucinda," he said in a low voice, which nevertheless reached the sheriff's ear. "Just having a little fun, a last fling, you know."

The sheriff's deep-set eyes shut up a trifle closer. The situation was suddenly clear.

"Dirty little puppy!" he thought.

The music struck up. Lucinda was a good dancer, having kept in practise by teaching her small sisters.

She had no lack of partners, for there were many young men in the room to whom a hint from the sheriff was sufficient. She gave herself up to the perfect hour; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining; for the first time in her life it seemed easy to talk, and the words came without painful effort and long intervals of dumbness.

Ephraim Horn looked on in amazement. He saw Lucinda well-dressed, happy, talking merrily—easily the belle among a dozen or more prettier girls. As for Mamie Marshall, he was having altogether too much of her society. Of course he did not know the ins and outs of high life in the Greenville smart set, and could not guess that Miss Marshall's brother had been refused membership in that particular club. Consequently the members considered it bad taste for her to come, or to bring a stranger, and the two were left to solitude *à deux* and the chilling atmosphere that may be expected by uninvited guests. Miss Marshall vented her ill-humor on Ephraim, and he found her much less charming than he had thought her that afternoon.

"What did you say was the name of that girl—the thin one the men seem so crazy about?"

"That," said Ephraim loftily, "is Miss Lucinda Fifer, my affianced bride."

Miss Marshall turned up her nose in elegant scorn.

"You can't stuff me! You told me this afternoon you weren't engaged to anybody, and now you claim that girl, who hasn't noticed you the whole evening! Why haven't you danced with her, if you're engaged?"

"Certainly I will, if you will excuse me," said Ephraim.

He went over to where Lucinda was resting during an intermission in the music. Jim Baker sat on one side of her, and his friend Bob Thompson was fanning her.

"Miss Lucinda, may I have the pleasure of the next dance?" asked Horn in his most pompous manner.

Surely the little god who presides over lovers gives every woman now and then the saving grace of timely indifference!

"I have an engagement," answered Lucinda.

"The next, then?" asked Horn more humbly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Horn, but all my dances are promised," said Lucinda carelessly. She turned with a smile to Thompson. "Do finish telling me about that hunting trip."

This was too much for Ephraim.

"Lucinda," he began impressively, "you seem to forget what is between us."

"I don't see anything but a chair between you," drawled the sheriff; "but as you're a stranger, I'll give you a friendly warning that there's apt to be trouble between you and some of our fellows if you try to steal the dances they have been waiting for all the evening! Where do you come from, man, that you think you could get a dance with Miss Fifer at eleven o'clock? They've all been promised two hours ago."

Wholly routed, Horn retreated to Miss Marshall.

"You didn't seem to dance with your affianced bride!" she sneered.

"N-no," gasped Eph.

"I said you wouldn't. Let's go—I'm tired of this!"

She was sullen and silent on the way home, and Ephraim was too agitated for many words. As soon as he had said good-night to Miss Marshall, he sped along the dark side of the street back to the Town Hall. Through the open windows he could see Lucinda still holding court.

"There was always the making of a fine woman in her, but I was the first at home to find it out. Here all these town fellows see it at once. If I don't get her back home soon, they'll be cutting me out!" He thought how cheerful and comfortable Lucinda could make home for the boys and himself. "They would never take to any stepmother as they do to her," he groaned.

When he saw her coming down the steps on her cousin's arm, he could stand it no longer. He darted forward.

"Please let me come around to-morrow. There's a heap I want to say to you."

Before Lucinda could answer, the

sheriff put in, "Now, Lucy, don't let the men rob you of your beauty sleep! Come round about noon, Mr. What's-Your-Name. My cousin will have finished breakfast by then."

He hurried her into the buggy as he spoke.

IV.

EPHRAIM passed some restless hours—not in company with Miss Marshall or any of the fair damsels of Greenville—and presented himself at Mrs. Baker's as the town clock struck twelve. Lucinda had never seen him so lacking in self-confidence, while she felt less shy than she had ever been in his presence. The glamour of the preceding night was upon her. Ephraim's proposal no longer seemed an act of magnanimous condescension.

If Horn had breakfasted on anxiety, he now lunched upon humble pie. When he pleaded to be introduced to Mrs. Baker, she reminded him that he had negatived a similar suggestion when she made it. Ephraim finally won her over by suggesting that it would be advisable to have Mrs. Baker's assistance in selecting new parlor furniture. Ephraim had not thought of adding to his household goods, but as he looked at the Bakers' cozy room his own seemed shabby by contrast. Horn was prosperous, but he had never been noted for his liberality; yet when they visited the furniture stores that after-

noon, he fairly urged Lucinda to buy whatever she liked. When he saw her delight in her prospective possessions, he meekly made the request that was hammering at his heart—that she would curtail her visit and return with him the next day.

"When I see all the fellows after you, I just daren't leave you! Why, your cousin's just dead in love with you; he almost the same as told me so this morning to my very face, and it don't seem proper for you to stay on there when you're promised to me."

When Lucinda consented, Horn was so elated that he magnanimously bought a pipe as a parting gift to the sheriff.

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Lucinda has blossomed into a wholesome matron who has her own way about as often as the rest of women; and just how often that is, men can best determine. There is a little Lucy, and she lords it over her stepbrothers, who adore her.

"Well, well, will you just look at that!" exclaims Ephraim Horn admiringly. "Just see how the baby girl's got those boys harnessed up a drawin' her wagon! She knows how to make the lads wait on her already. I don't doubt as she'll grow up to be a belle, like her mother before her. Why, the whole town of Greenville was after Lucy when I just carried her off and married her myself!"